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Philippines

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Special Analysis**PHILIPPINES:****Increasing Labor Militancy**

President Marcos's government is worried about the proliferation of strikes in the past year and about labor's increasingly militant tone. These developments are probably caused in part by the Communist Party's penetration of unions. The country's diverse and fragmented unions are not likely to pose a serious threat to order any time soon, but if labor troubles persist, Marcos may decide on a show of force predicated on containing Communism and protecting the economy.

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Labor unrest also is growing because of deteriorating economic conditions for urban workers. Government estimates indicate that 282 strikes occurred last year involving nearly 70,000 workers—the largest number since martial law was declared in 1972. There were 173 strikes in the first half of this year, a 30-percent jump over the same period of 1984.

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Marcos responded last month by creating a presidential council with broad powers—including the authority to use military force—to ensure that labor disputes do not jeopardize the country's economic recovery. According to the US Embassy, Marcos—exaggerating the extent of Communist influence among workers—had intended to declare a state of emergency, but several of his advisers convinced him that such an extreme measure would have costly domestic and international repercussions.

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Labor at a Glance

The US Embassy observes that the labor movement is badly fragmented. Since martial law was lifted in 1981, numerous new unions and trade alliances have coalesced around personalities but have failed to evolve into a strong movement, a circumstance that makes coordinated actions difficult. The country's largest union, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, is generally regarded as a government-controlled front.

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A majority of the recent strikes and mass actions have been organized by leftists. The most prominent of the leftist-inclined factions is the May First Movement, an umbrella organization that is heavily penetrated by the Communist Party. The group claims a membership of 1 million and has been at the forefront of the most successful strikes, including the transportation stoppages last fall that paralyzed the cities of Davao and Cebu.

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Much of the group's organizational successes can be attributed to its close relationship with the leftist, issue-oriented political groups that sprang up in the aftermath of Benigno Aquino's assassination. Although more than 20,000 demonstrators turned out for May Day rallies in Manila, sponsored by the May First Movement, for example, Embassy reporting indicates that the participants were largely student activists—not workers as the labor organization claimed. A recent general strike at a nuclear power facility in Bataan was also jointly sponsored by this group and by leftist political organizations that are controlled by the Communist Party [redacted]

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Looking Ahead

The Communist Party identifies labor as the most successful of its penetrations of Philippine institutions—particularly on Mindanao—and intends to press harder to disrupt the economy by encouraging labor unrest. The party reportedly has even attempted to infiltrate the Trade Union Congress, prompting that union to adopt a more independent position from the government in an effort to blunt Communist inroads. [redacted]

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Evidence that the May First Movement is advocating violent confrontations with police during strikes appeared last spring when police dispersed picketing retail workers, and the leftist union responded by sending 100 workers to back up the local employees. Violence was averted only by local union officials' intervention to persuade the leftists to leave [redacted]

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The government thus far has been pursuing a policy of "maximum tolerance" during strikes and demonstrations, but this could change. Increasing labor militancy could provoke sharper complaints from businessmen and conservative party members, prompting Marcos to clamp down hard to show that he can contain the growth of the Communist Party, safeguard the climate for foreign investment, and protect the country's chances for economic recovery [redacted]
-CIA, DIA, NSA-

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